

Message Text

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AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
USLO RIYADH

S E C R E T SECTION 1 OF 3 BEIRUT 2192

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, LE
SUBJECT: INCIPIENT LEBANESE GOVERNMENT CRISIS

1. SUMMARY. AYN AR-RUMMANEH-SHIAH FIGHTING HAS BEEN
CONTAINED, BUT IT HAS GENERATED A MAJOR POLITICAL
CRISIS IN LEBANON. CONTROVERSY IS RAGING IN BEIRUT
AS TO WHO GAVE THE ORDER TO THE SYRIANS TO USE HEAVY
WEAPONS AGAINST AYN AR-RUMMANEH. REGARDLESS OF FACTS
OF THE MATTER, SARKIS/BOUTROS GOVERNMENT IS IN
POLITICAL DELIMMA OF BEING ABLE TO NEITHER AVOW NOR
DISAVOW THE SYRIAN ACTION. CAMILLE CHAMOUN IS ON HIS
WAR HORSE, ROUNDLY DENOUNCING SYRIANS AND AT LEAST
IMPLICITLY THE GOVERNMENT - A POSITION EXTREMELY
POPULAR WITH CHRISTIANS, PARTICULARLY THOSE OF AYN AR-
RUMMANEH. LEBANESE FRONT, HOWEVER, IS NOT UNITED

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WITH SULIMAN FRANGIEH IDENTIFYING WITH THE SYRIAN
POSITION, AND EVEN PIERRE GEMAYEL ATTEMPTING TO UPHOLD
RAPIDLY DYING MYTH OF SYRIAN-LEBANESE COOPERATION.
IT IS BEING RUMORED (BUT OFFICIALLY DENIED) THAT
PRIME MINISTER HOSS AND OTHER CABINET MEMBERS HAVE
OFFERED THEIR RESIGNATIONS, BUT THAT SARKIS HAS REFUSED
THEM. THE ATTENTION OF BEIRUT POLITICAL CIRCLES IS

NOW FOCUSING ON SCHEDULED APRIL 20 PARLIAMENTARY DEBATE (ON PALESTINIAN QUESTION AND OTHER MATTERS), WHICH MAY INDICATE TO CHAMOUN HOW BEST TO RIDE THE TIGER OF GROWING PUBLIC DISAFFECTION WITH SARKIS/HOSS/BOUTROS GOVERNMENT. HE MAY SEEK TO BRING DOWN THE HOSS/BOUTROS CABINET, REPLACING IT WITH ONE MORE AMENABLE TO HIS OWN VIEWS. THIS MIGHT NOT DESTROY THE PRESIDENCY AND CONSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURE, BUT WOULD BE FURTHER STEP TOWARDS DE FACTO PARTITION.
END SUMMARY.

2. THE AFTERMATH OF AYN-AR-RUMMANEH - SHIAH. WHEN SYRIANS INTERVENED ON APRIL 11 TO STOP FIGHTING BETWEEN CHRISTIANS IN AYN AR-RUMMANEH AND LEFTISTS IN SHIAH, THEY ALMOST CERTAINLY RECEIVED SNIPER FIRE THEMSELVES FROM AYN AR-RUMMANEH, (BUT NOT FROM SHIAH) DESPITE LEBANESE FRONT ASSURANCES THEIR MEN WOULD NOT FIRE. FOR NEXT TWO DAYS SYRIANS USED CONSIDERABLE TANK AND ARTILLERY FIRE AGAINST THE CHRISTIANS, KILLING AND WOUNDING IMPORTANT NUMBERS (ONE DATT REPORT SAYS 90 KILLED) AND INFLICTING VERY HEAVY MATERIAL DAMAGE, IN AYN AR-RUMMANEH AND NEARBY AREA OF BADARO. SYRIAN STATEMENTS, BOTH IN DAMASCUS AND IN BEIRUT THROUGH ADF "COMMANDER" SAMI KHATIB, HAVE EMPHASIZED THAT SYRIANS ENTERED AREA AT REQUEST OF LEBANESE AUTHORITIES, AND THAT THEIR FIRE WAS
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DIRECTED AGAINST SNIPERS. SYRIAN STATEMENT IN DAMASCUS, AS CARRIED IN BEIRUT PRESS APRIL 14 SAID THAT, "THE SYRIAN GOVERNMENT, WHICH HAD PUT SOME OF ITS FORCES UNDER THE COMMAND OF LEBANESE PRESIDENT ELIAS SARKIS TO HELP HIS RESTORE PEACE AND SECURITY TO LEBANON, STRESSES THAT IT DOES NOT INTERFERE IN THE ACTIONS OF THESE FORCES AND IN THE FULFILLMENT OF THEIR DUTIES IF THEY MOVE ON ORDERS OF THE LEGITIMATE AUTHORITY."

3. PRESIDENT SARKIS CONFIRMED TO THE AMBASSADOR THAT HE DID ORDER THE ADF TO INTERVENE, BUT IT WAS WITH THE AGREEMENT OF ALL CONCERNED. IT IS UNCLEAR WHAT KIND OF ORDERS SYRIAN UNITS INVOLVED IN THE OPERATION REALLY HAD. IN ANY EVENT, THEY WERE SOON FIRED UPON BY CHRISTIANS AND RESPONDED WITH ALL THEY HAD, INCLUDING HEAVY (122 MM) ARTILLERY AND STALIN ORGAN ROCKETS FIRED INDISCRIMINATELY. CHRISTIANS UNANIMOUSLY AGREED THAT SYRIAN RESPONSE WAS OUT OF ALL PROPORTIONS. THEY GENERALLY BELIEVE THAT SYRIAN OPERATION WAS PUNITIVE RETALIATION FOR FEBRUARY FAYYADIYAH INCIDENTS, RATHER THAN EFFORT TO RE-ESTABLISH PEACE BETWEEN CHRISTIAN RIGHTISTS AND LEFTISTS. WE ARE INCLINED TO AGREE

THAT THIS IS WHAT OPERATION BECAME, HOWEVER IT MAY HAVE
STARTED. IN ANY EVENT, GOL HAS LOST MUCH RESPECT IN
CHRISTIAN EYES BECAUSE IT WAS UNABLE TO CONTROL SYRIAN
RESPONSE.

4. PUBLIC ATTITUDE OF LEBANESE FRONT IS SUMMED UP IN
AL AMAL ARTICLE OF APRIL 14, WHICH ASKED THE FOLLOWING
QUESTIONS:

(A) WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE LEBANESE AUTHORITY
IN ITS RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE SECURITY OF THE PEOPLE
AND OF THE NATION?

(B) WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE
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REPUBLIC VIS-A-VIS THE ARAB DETERRENT FORCES, AND
WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE LEBANESE MILITARY COMMANDER
OF THESE FORCES? I.E. ARE THEY OR ARE THEY NOT
IN COMMAND? THEY ARE NOT, OF COURSE.

(C) WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE SYRIAN ARAB DETERRENT
FORCES IN LEBANON ? I.E. ARE THEY HERE TO FURTHER SYRIAN
DESIGN TO CONTROL LEBANON OR TO HELP THE GOL AND
MAINTAIN ORDER IMPARTIALLY?

(D) WHAT ABOUT THE PALESTINIAN QUESTION, WHICH
CANNOT BE RESOLVED DESPITE THE CLASHES, AND THE
(PALESTINIAN) OBJECTIVE OF DRAGGING THE LEBANESE
INTO A WAR AGAINST BOTH THE ARAB DETERRENT FORCES
AND THE PALESTINIANS?

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5. CAMILLE CHAMOUN ON HIS WARHORSE. LEBANESE FRONT
PRESIDENT CAMILLE CHAMOUN HAS TAKEN THE LEAD IN
DENOUNCING THE SYRIAN OPERATIONS AND DEMANDING AN
EXPLANATION. ON APRIL 14, HE PUBLICLY DEMANDED THAT
THE LEBANESE GOVERNMENT EITHER DENY ITS ASSOCIATION WITH
THE SYRIAN POSITION OR TAKE FULL RESPONSIBILITY FOR
THE SHELLING. IN AN INFLAMMATORY COMMUNIQUE, HE
DESCRIBED HOW HE "WAS STUNNED BY THE HORROR OF THE
TRAGEDY WHICH KILLED OVER 30 PEOPLE, WOUNDED 200 -
MOST OF THEM CIVILIANS, WOMEN AND CHILDREN - AND
DESTROYED AND BURNED MORE THAN 300 BUILDINGS AND
HOMES . . . I HAIL AYN AR-RUMMANEH, TAHWITA, FURN ES-
CHEBAK, AND BADARO. OUR INNOCENT MARTYRS HAVE
RECORDED YET ANOTHER EPIC OF HEROISM AND SACRIFICE ..
YOUR HOMES WHICH HAVE LOST THEIR ROOFS AND THEIR
WALLS ARE LIKE FORTRESSES DEFYING TIME AND HISTORY.. "
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6. ON APRIL 16, CHAMOUN BROADENED HIS ATTACK,
AND SHIFTED HIS FIRE TO THE SYRIANS. HE SAID THAT
THE SYRIANS WERE TRYING TO IMPUTE ALL RESPONSIBILITY TO
THE LEBANESE AUTHORITIES. "I DO NOT BELIEVE THAT
THE LEBANESE AUTHORITIES ASKED THE SYRIAN ADF TO ACT
AS IT DID, TO STRIKE SO BRUTALLY AND WITHOUT
JUSTIFICATION A REGION WITH 350,000 INHABITANTS."
HE CLAIMED THAT THE SYRIANS USED PHOSPHOROUS BOMBS,
120 AND 160 MILIMETER MORTARS, ROCKETS, TANKS,
HEAVY MACHINE GUNS AND OTHER WEAPONS, "WHICH ARE
NOT USED EXCEPT IN WARS OF EXTERMINATION. . . .
THIS CONTRAVENES THE MOST ELEMENTARY PRINCIPALS OF
THE UNITED NATIONS AND OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS
CHARTER. I DO NOT BELIEVE THAT THE LEBANESE
GOVERNMENT COULD HAVE ANTICIPATED THAT THE SITUATION
WOULD DETERIORATE TO THIS POINT; THE TONE OF THE
SYRIAN COMMUNIQUE THEREFORE DOES NOT REFLECT BUT A

QUARTER OF THE TRUTH. AS TO THE WHOLE TRUTH, IT LIES IN THE FACT THAT EXTREME BRUTALITY WAS ADOPTED UNNECESSARILY TO ACCOMPLISH A MISSION AGAINST A COMMUNITY OF 350,000 SOULS." DESCRIBING HIS MEETING WITH SYRIAN ENVOY GENERAL MOHAMMED KHOLI, CHAMOUN SAID HE TOLD KHOLI, "MAKE YOUR ACTS AGREE WITH YOUR WORDS AND USE APPROPRIATE MEANS . . . YOUR TROOPS DO NOT CONDUCT THEMSELVES LIKE A PEACEKEEPING FORCE. YOU HAVE THEREFORE ERRED." CHAMOUN SAID HE REJECTED OUT OF HAND KHOLI'S SUGGESTION THAT THERE HAD BEEN A PLOT AIMED AT UNDERMINING SYRIAN-LEBANESE RELATIONS.

7. SIMULTANEOUSLY, CHAMOUN IS KEEPING ALIVE THE NOTION THAT THE LEBANESE CRISIS CAN SOMEHOW BE "INTERNATIONALIZED", THAT IS, THAT THE UN CAN
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SOMEHOW BE PERSUADED TO TAKE ALL RESPONSIBILITY FOR SECURITY IN ALL OF LEBANON. AT HAND, HE HAS THE GROWING UNIFIL PRESENCE IN SOUTH LEBANON. IN EFFECT, HE IS SUGGESTING TO THE LEBANESE THAT THERE IS A VIABLE ALTERNATIVE TO THE SYRIAN ADF. HE KNOWS BETTER (SEE FOR EXAMPLE, BEIRUT 2131), BUT IS KEEPING ALIVE THE NOTION, AS HE HAS PERIODICALLY OVER THE PAST THREE YEARS. SPEAKING TO THE PRESS ON APRIL 14, AFTER HIS MEETING WITH AMBASSADOR PARKER, IN RESPONSE TO A QUESTION ABOUT WHETHER HE AND THE AMBASSADOR ALSO DISCUSSED INTERNATIONALIZATION, CHAMOUN SAID, "THE ISSUE IS UNDER STUDY. I AM THE ONE WHO PROPOSED IT, BUT I CANNOT SAY WHETHER IT WILL COME TO PASS OR NOT."

8. LEBANESE FRONT DIVERGENCES. CHAMOUN'S ATTACK ON THE SYRIANS DIRECTLY, AND BY IMPLICATION ON THE SARKIS GOVERNMENT, HAS NOT ENJOYED THE FULL SUPPORT OF HIS LEBANESE FRONT SENIOR COLLEAGUES. SULIMAN FRANGIEH AND HIS SON TONY CONTINUE TO SUPPORT GENERALLY THE SYRIAN ROLE IN LEBANON. MORE SIGNIFICANTLY, PHALANGE LEADER PIERRE GEMAYEL MADE A CONCILIATORY STATEMENT APRIL 14, SAYING THAT "SOME LEBANESE AND SOME SYRIANS" WERE TRYING TO UNDERMINE LEBANESE-SYRIAN RELATIONS AND PROPOSED ESTABLISHMENT OF A JOINT COMMITTEE OF THREE SENIOR SYRIANS APPOINTED BY THE SYRIAN PRESIDENT AND THREE SENIOR LEBANESE "TO CONTAIN LITTLE INCIDENTS AS SOON AS THEY OCCUR." HE SAID, "THE SYRIAN ARMY, LIKE THE LEBANESE ARMY, IS NOT EQUIPPED FOR POLITICS. THESE THINGS HAPPEN - DELIBERATELY OR OTHERWISE - WE CAN EASILY CONTAIN THEM THROUGH BROTHERLY COOPERATION" GEMAYEL ALLUDED TO "SPIES AND AGENTS" SEEKING TO PROVOKE THE

SITUATION, AND SAID, "LEBANON AND SYRIA CAN PROTECT
THEIR JOINT INTERESTS BY RESPECTING EACH OTHER'S
SOVEREIGNTY." SUMMING UP THE CURRENT STATE OF OPINION
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WITHIN THE LEBANESE FRONT, LEFTIST AS SAFIR APRIL 15 SAID
THAT FRANGHIEH WAS AGAINST BOTH PARTITION AND
INTERNATIONALIZATION, GEMAYEL SUPPORTED INTERNATIONALIZA-
TION BUT OPPOSED PARTITION; CHAMOUN WANTED BOTH
INTERNATIONALIZATION AND PARTITION.
(SAEB SALAAM TOLD AMBASSADOR APRIL 17 THAT HE WOULD
FAVOR INTERNATIONALIZATION IF SOMEHOW POSSIBLE;
AMBASSADOR SAID IT WASN'T. SALAAM'S VIEW IS THAT
ONLY SOLUTION TO PALESTINIAN PROBLEM LIES IN MOSLEM-
CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE, BUT CHAMOUNS WERE NOT BEING
HELPFUL.)

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9. BREWING GOVERNMENT CRISIS. PRESS REPORTS APRIL 17 THAT

PRIME MINISTER HOSS OFFERED HIS RESIGNATION TO SARKIS ON APRIL 14. WE HAVE HEARD THAT HE OFFERED TO DO SO, IF THE PRESIDENT THOUGHT IT WOULD BE HELPFUL IN THE PRESENT SITUATION, BUT THAT THE PRESIDENT FLATLY REFUSED. AMBASSADOR WAS TOLD BY MARWAN HAMMADE THAT HOSS'S REAL MOTIVE IN OFFERING TO RESIGN WAS THAT HE IS REALLY FED UP WITH BEING A FIFTH WHEEL IN A GOVERNMENT RUN BY SARKIS AND BOUTROS. WE HAVE ALSO HEARD THAT TWO OTHER MINISTERS HAVE LIKEWISE OFFERED THEIR RESIGNATIONS. OUR GUESS IS THAT HOSS, WHO IS INTENSELY LOYAL PERSONALLY TO SARKIS, WILL NOT RESIGN UNLESS THE PRESIDENT DECIDES THAT IS WHAT HE WANTS. ON PAST PERFORMANCE, IT IS ALMOST CERTAIN THAT SARKIS WILL NOT GO FOR SUCH A DRAMATIC STEP AT THIS TIME. AN NAHAR APRIL 17 OFFERED THREE PLAUSIBLE CONSIDERATIONS AGAINST SUCH A STEP AT THIS TIME: (1) THE DIFFICULTY OF FORMING A NEW GOVERNMENT; (2) THE COMPLICATING SECRET

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EFFECT SUCH A MOVE WOULD HAVE ON THE LOCAL POLITICAL SITUATION, AND (3) THE APPEARANCE OF WEAKNESS IT WOULD GIVE, AT A TIME WHEN U.N. SEC GEN WALDHEIM WAS VISITING. PRESS APRIL 18 REPORTS THAT HOSS HAS OFFICIALLY DENIED THAT HE OFFERED HIS RESIGNATION, BUT ADDED AMBIGUOUSLY, "WE ARE READY TO TAKE ANY STEP WHICH MIGHT SERVE THE PUBLIC INTERESTS." IN ANY CASE, EVERYONE KNOWS THAT IT WAS SARKIS HIMSELF WHO WAS THE KEY LEBANESE GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL INVOLVED IN NEGOTIATIONS WITH BOTH THE SYRIANS AND THE LEBANESE FRONT LEADERS DURING THE AYN AR-RUMMANEH-SHIAH INCIDENTS. EVEN IF HOSS WERE WILLING, HE WOULD NOT BE A CREDIBLE SCAPEGOAT IN THE SITUATION.

10. NEXT EVENT: PARLIAMENTARY DEBATE ON THE PALESTINIAN QUESTION. A WEEK AGO, HOUSE SPEAKER KAMEL ASSAD ANNOUNCED A SPECIAL PARLIAMENTARY SESSION FOR APRIL 20 TO DEBATE THE PALESTINIAN QUESTION. AS OF THIS TIME, THE MEETING IS STILL SCHEDULED, ALTHOUGH FOREIGN MINISTER BOUTROS AND OTHERS DOUBT THAT IT WILL EVER TAKE PLACE. DESPITE LEBANESE FRONT HOPES - OR WISHFUL THINKING - THERE DOES NOT SEEM TO BE EMERGING ANY MEANINGFUL LEBANESE MOSLEM WILLINGNESS TO JOIN FORCES WITH THE MARONITES AT THIS TIME TO MAKE A COMMON FRONT AGAINST THE PALESTINIANS. ASSAD HIMSELF AND A NUMBER OF OTHER SHI'A DEPUTIES APPEAR WILLING TO DO SO, AT LEAST IN SOME FORM, BUT A NUMBER OF OTHER SHI'A DEPUTIES AND THE GREAT MAJORITY OF SUNNI DEPUTIES, NOT TO MENTION THE LEBANESE LEFT, ARE DISTINCTLY UNENTHUSIASTIC OR EVEN OPPOSED. AS OF THIS TIME, IT IS VIRTUALLY CERTAIN THAT THE PARLIAMENTARY SESSION WOULD NOT PRODUCE ANY NATIONAL CONSENSUS ON THE PALESTINIAN ISSUE. THE QUESTION THEREFORE REMAINS, WHAT AIM WOULD THE SESSION SERVE? WE WOULD RATE THE CHANCES OF THE SESSION BEING CANCELLED BETWEEN NOW AND THURSDAY AS BETTER THAN EVEN; EVEN IF IT GOES FORWARD WE WOULD ANTICIPATE ANY MEANINGFUL OUTCOME. PRESS APRIL 17 REPORTS THAT KAMEL ASSAD'S FRIENDS ARE TALKING ABOUT A

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SEVEN-POINT AGENDA FOR APRIL 20, WITH "THE ARMED PALESTINIAN PRESENCE" LISTED AS THE FOURTH ITEM. THIS SUGGESTS PROCESS OF DULUTION OF THE ISSUE HAS ALREADY BEGUN.

11. NEVERTHELESS, SINCE CHAMOUN IS ON HIS WARHORSE, WE WOULD NOT RULE OUT THE POSSIBILITY THAT, WITH OR WITHOUT A PARLIAMENTARY SESSION, HE WILL ATTEMPT TO CAPITALIZE ON THE SITUATION TO FOCUS PUBLIC ATTENTION ON THE CONTINUING MOSLEM UNWILLINGNESS TO CONFRONT THE PALESTINIANS. HE MIGHT FIND A WAY TO DOVETAIL THIS WITH HIS CURRENT ATTACK ON THE SYRIANS AND SARKIS GOVERNMENT.

12. IT IS UNCLEAR HOW ALL THIS WILL TURN OUT. WE FEAR THAT CHAMOUN MAY PERCEIVE - CORRECTLY - A CHANCE TO BRING DOWN THE HOSS GOVERNMENT WITH TWO POSSIBLE RESULTS: (1) FORMATION OF A NEW GOVERNMENT I WHICH CHAMOUN HIMSELF WILL PLAY A DOMINANT ROLE, EITHER DIRECTLY OR INDIRECTLY THROUGH FRIENDS IN THE CABINET; (2) A CHANCE TO BRING DOWN NOT ONLY THE HOSS GOVERNMENT BUT THE WHOLE GOVERNMENTAL STRUCTURE, WITH EITHER HIMSELF REPLACING SARKIS OR EFFECTIVE REPARTITIONING OF THE GOVERNMENT, AS IN 1975.

12. CONCLUSION: THE LEBANESE GOVERNMENT IS FACING ANOTHER MAJOR CRISIS. IT MAY BE ABLE TO STUMBLE THROUGH, AND THE SITUATION A MONTH FROM NOW MAY BE ABOUT THE SAME AS IT IS TODAY. ON THE OTHER HAND, THE MARONITES, LED BY CHAMOUN, MAY HAVE REACHED THE POINT WHERE THEY WILL INSIST ON FORCING THE ISSUE; THE LEBANESE MOSLEMS IN THE MARONITE VIEW MUST CHOOSE BETWEEN COOPERATING WITH THEM OR WITH THE PALESTINIANS. IF THE MOSLEMS REFUSE TO CHOOSE, THE MOST LIKELY COURSE, THE MARONITES MAY TRY TO GO IT ALONE AND A NEW CHAPTER IN LEBANON'S TURBULENT POLITICAL HISTORY WILL BEGIN. PARKER

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